

## The Cost of Inflexible Design: Why Truro is Still Waiting for a DPW

The Chair of the Ad Hoc Building Committee (AHBC) recently stated that "the cost of inaction is not neutral." It is a compelling phrase designed to frame any "No" vote as a mounting expense or a lack of respect for our hardworking Department of Public Works (DPW) team. But this narrative ignores a more uncomfortable truth: **The primary cause of inaction in Truro is the Committee's refusal to provide a fiscally responsible solution**

### The April 2024 Mandate vs. Today's Mission Creep

To understand why the Town is stalled, we must look at the AHBC's own records. On **April 24, 2024**, the Committee formally recommended a maximum borrowing authorization of **\$28,310,000** for a building of **20,150 square feet, reported then as the maximum size option<sup>1</sup>**.

Two years later, those "maximums" has been discarded. The current proposal has ballooned to **\$33.6 million**—an **18% increase** in cost—and the size has crept up to **26,500 square feet**. With just the "base" option, we will have \$32.1 million and 21,300 square feet. If the Committee itself has determined that \$28.3 million was the limit, how can they justify asking for **over \$5 million more** today? This isn't "the cost of inflation"; it is "Scope Creep" from their commitment at the taxpayers' expense.

### The Binary Trap

The AHBC is presenting this at ATM as a binary "Yes or No" choice. Early in this process, the Owners Project Manager (OPM, Apex) stated: *"You can build a \$20 million DPW, but you have to cut a lot"* Another member of Apex later confirmed this, saying "A DPW could be developed for \$20M if we modified the program requirements..." This was delivered as a caution about trade-offs, yet we seem to have made no significant trade-offs. The real question this taxpayer is asking is: **"What can we get for \$20 million?"**

### The Math of Defiance

Perhaps most concerning is the dismissive attitude toward the taxpayers' ability to pay. When confronted with the rising tax burden, the Finance Committee Chair, also conveniently a member of the AHBC, suggested that **taxpayers could "defer paying taxes" or "tap equity in your home."** This is a startling shift in municipal philosophy. It suggests that if the town cannot design a project within its means, the residents should take out second mortgages or go into personal debt for 30 years to bridge the gap. Municipal planning should fit the town's budget; it should not require residents to liquidate their home equity to fund a garage.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.truro-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/791/DPW-Ad-Hoc-Final-Recommendation---April-2024-PDF>

## The True Goal of a Schematic Design

In any major capital project, the **Schematic Design** phase has one primary objective: **to translate a "requirements list" into a "workable reality."** This stage is specifically designed to:

1. Establish the total building area and spatial and energy requirements for operations.
2. Provide the first reliable cost estimate based on current market rates.
3. **Confirm Affordability.** By definition, a schematic is the "sanity check." It is the moment where the town must ask: *"Does this design align with our investment paybacks and our long-term debt service capacity?"* If the schematic phase does not produce a project that the Town can afford, the design is, by professional standards, a failure.

When the Town originally voted to fund this phase, the authorization wasn't a blank check—it was a "look-and-see." Remember, the voters rejected the \$28.3 Million put forward in 2024 and approved only a schematic design phase. The amendment also required that Town Meeting formally approve the results of the design phase *before* committing to construction.

The logic was sound: the voters expected to see the "What" and the "How Much" before saying "Yes" to the debt. A year later, at the next Town Meeting, there was no review presented to the voters for approval. Now, two years later, we have arrived at the final hour without that mandated approval. If the Design Phase cost is a lost cost for the Town, the Select Board and the AHBC own it. The voters had no role in the decision.

## A Procedural Failure

Remember the "Russ Braun Amendment" from the 2024 ATM<sup>2</sup>?. That amendment sought to limit expenditures to the schematic design phase so the town could "stop and reassess" before committing to any path. Because that language was never read aloud by the Moderator, the AHBC treated the vote as a green light to forge ahead with construction documents for a project they already knew exceeded the Town's appetite.

In fact, at the 2025 ATM a citizen petition to cap the budget at \$20M fell just 17 votes short of passing, on the last item of a long meeting with no discussion allowed on the floor. Almost half the voters said they didn't want to spend more than \$20M. So what's the chance that two-thirds will vote to spend \$30M or more? Slim, but the AHBC forged ahead allocating over \$2 million in debt to pay for more design work.

To suggest now that we must spend **\$33.6 million** to avoid "wasting" the up to **\$2.8 million** already spent on design is the definition of a "sunk-cost" fallacy. You do not fix a \$2 million-plus dollar mistake by making a \$34 million one. There's another "sunk cost" fallacy argument in the works: if we delay approving \$33 million it will cost us another \$5 million next year. One Select Board member recently said she had "already calculated" this

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/19wLWOPoGib1SZs7pGwgAV5BghuEDB5SI/view?usp=sharing>

cost. But here's the sunk-cost fallacy: if we actually get it to below \$20M as we know we can, we save \$13 million - or even if there is inflation of about \$1.5M, we still save over \$10 million.

### **Negotiation rule #1:**

The "All or Nothing" strategy has failed twice. If the \$30+ million plan fails again on May 16, the responsibility for further "inaction" will rest solely with the Committee that refused to compromise. True leadership isn't about telling residents to tap their home equity; it's about listening to the mandate they've already given. It is time to stop the overreach and bring a project to the Town Meeting floor that Truro taxpayers can afford to build and will accept.

In any rational negotiation, if a buyer says "No" to a price, the seller does not return with a higher one. Yet, the Committee's strategy since 2019 has been one of "All or Nothing."

- **Two years ago:** A \$35 million and a **\$28.3 million** proposal were rejected by voters.
- **Today:** The Committee returns with a price tag of **\$33.6 million**, an **18% increase** over the last failed bid.

This is not a negotiation. It is a form of Russian Roulette, a high-stakes gamble by Town officials that voters will choose to dodge the bullet. It is not treating the taxpayers' needs equal to their own interests. We can debate if they should be. But there is no debate: the taxpayer needs are NOT given primary or equal consideration in this project. Nor was our 2025 vote respected: there was NO approved budget number for this project as required in 2024.

### **Conclusion**

As taxpayers we can refuse to pass this DPW article and also refuse to accept blame for a NO vote on this project. Affordability is a requirement of any project. Affordability is the first thing you establish before you accept a design. The price tag was a problem in 2019, and it remains a problem in 2026. Who can dispute this simple fact?

- **Michael R. Forgione**